

Catching the Sun

by guardianofscrewingup

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Family, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Astrid, Hiccup

Status: Completed

Published: 2011-12-09 02:21:28

Updated: 2012-09-12 05:17:57

Packaged: 2016-04-26 12:07:25

Rating: T

Chapters: 8

Words: 17,503

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: What childhood influences make a Hiccup? Add one boyhood crush, a tablespoon of Gobber's mentoring, two cups of childhood loneliness and ostracization, and a heaping helping of fatherly disapproval. Stir vigorously, then bake for fifteen years.

1. Part 1

****Disclaimer:** **HTTYD is not mine. No profit is being made.

****Summary:**** A series of snapshots from Hiccup's early years. What childhood influences make a Hiccup? Add one boyhood crush, a tablespoon of Gobber's mentoring, two cups of childhood loneliness and ostracization, and a heaping helping of fatherly disapproval. Stir vigorously. Bake for fifteen years, then leave to cool in the brisk Berk climate.

****Author's notes:**** Just wanted to try my hand at putting some background to Hiccup's crush on Astrid. Somehow, Hiccup's complicated relationship with his father, estrangement from the tribe, and relationship with Gobber wound their way in, too.

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><p>Catching the Sun

****By Saphie****

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><p>Part 1

When they were toddlers, their mothers would have a mug of cider together in the afternoons and discuss dragon-fighting tactics, battle-plans, adventuring, and the usual good-natured gossip just

about every Viking engaged in when there wasn't something to fight. Clad in their woolen baby gowns, the young Hiccup and Astrid mostly sat around on the Hofferson's bear-skin rug enthusiastically drooling on themselves. Astrid, ever-determined, had completely ignored Hiccup, opting instead to spend all her time trying to roll over and crawl, her round baby face screwed up in determination. Hiccup, on the other hand, had simply lay there on the floor, watching Astrid with wide and curious eyes, gnawing on his newly-discovered fingers.

At least that was what Mrs. Hofferson had told the two later, after Hiccup had met Toothless, after he'd saved the village, after it became apparent that Hiccup was to be a regular fixture in Astrid's life.

Neither of them remembered anything from that age. In fact, Hiccup didn't remember anything before age five, other than a few snippets here and there of a brunette woman he thought was maybe his mother. He had never really questioned why his memories of early childhood were so sparse, but if he had, he would have supposed that it had something to do with the fact that he'd never had anyone to discuss the things that happened to him with. Wasn't that, after all, how memories worked? Events happened and a child's memory of them was reinforced by the loving reminiscences of family members.

"Remember that time you got into the flour bin?"

"Remember when you refused to wear clothes and ran through the village?"

"Remember when you opened the window during one of the raids and let a Terrible Terror into the house?"

His father hadn't really ever been the type to reminisce. Growing up, Hiccup often wondered if that was because he didn't like to talk about the time he'd lost his wife or if it was because he didn't like to talk about the time he'd still had hope for his son.

Maybe it was just because for the longest time they couldn't seem to talk to each other _at all._

In any case, after hearing Mrs. Hofferson cheerfully tell the both of them about it one day while he and Astrid sat in her kitchen having an afternoon snack, Hiccup came to the quiet conclusion that it had likely been the start of a trend of Astrid being impressive and him being impressed.

2. Part 2

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****Author's notes:**** Some of the writing in this chapter comes from my RP with the fabulous astridhofferson on LJ, and is being used with her permission. Just giving credit where credit is due.

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><p>Catching the Sun

****By Saphie****

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><p>Part 2

When they were eight, they played together by choice, but then all the young Vikings in the village did whenever they could escape their daily chores. Scrawny and already acknowledged to be on the strange side with all the odd questions he asked and the strange observations he made, Hiccup was always ending up underfoot during the times it was most inconvenient to the adults, but it wasn't yet apparent that he would grow up to be the nuisance and weakling that would become the butt of all the village jokes. He was Stoick's son, after all. He was small for an eight-year-old, but surely he was due for a growth spurt or two, and perhaps some of those odd thoughts of his would leave his head and he'd think like a proper Viking.

That was what the adults thought, at least. The other kids were _merciless_.

They played athletic games Hiccup was never good at, like a game Ruffnut and Tuffnut both claimed to have invented (and fought over credit for) called "bashyball" which mostly consisted of bashing a ball made of leathers into each other's faces. (Hiccup hated it). They talked about adult things they didn't understand as if they did. (Hiccup was better at this, because he actually understood what the grownups were talking about sometimes, but no one ever listened to him.) They also slayed imaginary dragons. (Hiccup was the best at this, because he could come up with fantastical imaginary scenarios, but they never let him have any of the good parts.)

His favorite times were when he could play with Astrid by himself. When she tired of Snotlout's endless bragging, of Tuff and Ruff's continual squabbling, and of Fishleg's endless spouting of random facts, she sometimes arranged to meet up with Hiccup alone in a field somewhere, while the others traipsed around the village.

"Late!" she said in a haughty voice, arms crossed as he arrived in the field they'd planned to play in one day. "This calls for punishment, just so you know. Be prepared for the consequences!"

"Sorry! I'm sorry, Astrid. Dad was mad at me for-"

Actually, Hiccup wasn't sure why his dad was mad at him, but it had something to do with a rock and his head and he didn't really understand what his dad had been getting it, but hitting his head on things generally seemed like a bad idea.

"-well, never mind, because I'm not actually sure why he was mad at me, but I'm here!" Hiccup said, holding up his arms in a placating

fashion, hoping to avoid the inevitable noogies or pinching that were to come.

He got a rather merciful-by Astrid standards-smack on his shoulder for his lateness. "Ow. There we go. I'm punished, right? Good and punished."

"Not enough! I waited for an hour!"

Being the victor of all their games, and the one among them that could take all the others in a fight, Astrid was generally used to getting her way. She crossed her wiry, little arms and lifted her chin imperiously at him. Then a wicked grin slowly spread across her face.

"How about I braid your haaaair? Maybe I'll ask Ruffnut for help since you have a looooot of hair. I can't braid it by myself and I don't think I'm as good as mom."

Astrid's fiendish manner made it clear that she thought HE WOULD LOOK SO FABULOUS.

Hiccup's shoulders sagged, and his hands went up to his head to cover his hair.

Braids weren't particularly embarrassing. After all, many of the men in the village sported them in their hair and beards. And it generally wasn't looked down on by any of the kids when any of the others played "house" things, like hair-braiding. Both the girls and boys liked it as an occasional alternative to all the imaginary adventuring when they needed a breather. In fact, among their little gaggle of playmates, it was actually Snotlout that had the greatest predilection towards playing at domesticity, especially with dolls. What was wrong with pretending to take care of babies? All the mothers and fathers in the village took their turns at caring for their children, and caring for children and the rest of your tribe was Vikingly. Usually any games of house that they play-pretended culminated in a very heroic defense of the doll-children from imaginary dragons, anyway.

Astrid and Ruffnut actually played "house" type things more rarely than the boys, and they tended more towards making "armor" which was really code for jewelry and other ornamentation (usually made out of bobbins and string and shiny stones and any small animal skulls they could find). But as they were the only ones with hair long enough to braid, they tended to be the ones that preferred rigorous bouts of hair-braiding the most. Hiccup often braided their hair without their asking, because he was usually very fidgety and liked doing things with his hands, but he hated, hated, absolutely hated when they wanted to braid his. While the other boys, who had hair that was too short to braid, wandered off to do something interesting, he had to sit still the entire time. For someone with his attention span, it was torture on par with the blood eagle.

This was something that both girls knew which was why they sometimes did it. They loved to torture him. Astrid more so than Ruffnut, sometimes, and for the life of him, Hiccup couldn't figure out why she liked to see him squirm. Though come to think of it, sometimes when she was playing with his hair on the sides, he'd tilt his head just enough to peek at her and she'd have this strangely thoughtful

look on her face, as if she found playing with his hair soothing or something. For all people acted like he was a little strange, she was the one that was a weird girl sometimes, in Hiccup's opinion.

"After you braid my hair, can we play?"

Astrid thought about this carefully. "Weeell, I don't know where Ruffnut is, so it'll have to wait. But you're not off the hook! I'll get you back later. We can play now in the meantime."

Hiccup bounced up and down.

"I have a new idea for a-for a something we can play," he said. "It's about a warrior queen and-and her her loyal vassal. Only he's, uh, he's secretly a prince, but neither of them know it."

He dithered about awkwardly for a second. Even though he was the one that usually came up with the pretend scenarios, he was never allowed to give himself any roles that were any fun or he got picked on. If he tried to be a chief or a king or a god or a powerful warrior, the others usually laughed at him and made him take on the part of, well, the sidekick. The person that carried the weapons, the poor sod that had to be rescued from slavery, that sort of thing. Somebody had to be the damsel, and the other boys never wanted to be, and _no one on the face of the earth _could make the girls do it.

But today he had time with just Astrid. Maybe him being a princely warrior would be okay with her. When he asked to be something cool, she never made fun of him.

"They have to fight the hordes of evil barbarians that are charging into their lands, and they're led by a warlord that rides-he rides a giant lizard that shoots spikes like a Nadder," Hiccup said, gesticulating wildly with his hands. "They have to get a magic axe first for the queen to use to defeat the warlord."

For a moment, Astrid just stared at him hard, and he withered slightly under her gaze.

"No good?" he asked sheepishly. "I can think of something else."

But boy, that would be difficult, as he'd spent all morning ignoring his father talking at him and coming up with that instead.

"I..." Astrid suddenly grabbed his shoulders and shook him excitedly. "I LOVE IT! Where should we start?"

Hiccup grinned wildly despite the shaking. Astrid was hard to impress and when he did impress her, it had a way of leaving a strange, warm feeling pooling in the pit of his stomach.

"We need weapons first, my queen!" After she let go of him, he ran over a nearby copse of trees and picked up two sticks from the ground and tossed her the heftier one. "Look! Barbarian scouts just ahead! We must stop them and question them for information about their master!"

Astrid caught the stick, twirling it with obvious skill (she'd already started to learn to fight from her mother and father) and pointed the "weapon" heroically at... several lone stacks of hay.

Those poor lifeless stacks of hay had no clue what was coming to them.

"Excellent work, Madguts! Ha, do those fools dare think they can invade my kingdom? Taking me for some prissy, helpless queen, do they? They forget I'm a Viking!" Astrid shouldered the stick, lifting her hand and releasing a haughty laugh behind it, "Ohohohoho! We shall make them squeal out everything they know!"

"They'll quake in fear of the might of Madguts the Murderous and Queen Ironfists the Irate. The fools should've known that we were even more barbaric than they!" He smacked a haystack with his "sword." "Talk! Tell us where your master is hiding!"

"They're not telling us anything!" Of course, it was just hay, which wasn't the most talkative in general. Astrid flailed, with faux fury that was intimidating to Hiccup even in its obvious falseness. "They mock ME?"

She speared the nearest haystack with her imaginary sword and dove in, hay flying everywhere.

Bursting free from the mess, "Queen Ironfists" laughed manically, tearing at it and lifting a fistful of straw. Apparently that "barbarian" had his insides ripped out. Lovely. So much for information from that one.

Hiccup winced sympathetically at the haystack, his imagination as overactive as ever, and for a moment, caught himself looking at Astrid as she posed imperiously, her teeth bared in a ferocious little grin, particles of hay drifting around her in the air and catching the sun. It was the same color as her hair.

Then he shook himself out of it and turned to the other haystack, yelling, "TALK! My queen is not a patient person. Talk or you'll end up like your friend! Where is your master? Where is Warlord Skunknuts?"

Hiccup mimicked an evil thug voice. "'In the valley! He's in the valley next to the mountains! Please, let me live! I beg for your mercy.'"

"Fool!" Hiccup declared in his own voice again. "We're Vikings! We don't know the meaning of mercy!"

He stabbed the minion in his hay-filled guts. "You can finish him, oh, Queen!"

Snarling, Astrid added the finishing touch, stabbing the coward in the "head". She then tore out that hay stack's innards before flinging it away and turning to Hic-Madguts, grinning proudly.

"That was impressive skill, my minion. When we return to the castle after we've slain their dumb lord, I will reward you with your pick of some of the finest lands and sheeps in my kingdom."

The day was wiled away with the attack of various minions, fighting a horde of dragons, crossing a moat, and navigating a maze full of deadly traps. In the maze, they listened to an oracle that revealed Hiccup's princeliness and that was destined for tragedy, and that

Astrid was destined for greatness. Finally, armed with her magic axe, Astrid got to take on Warlord Skunknuts. After Hiccup tragically sacrificed himself to take a spike shot by his giant lizard meant for Astrid and chopped the death-lizard's head off, he lay there, half-dead, as Astrid defeated the warlord handily.

Hay lay scattered all over the ground.

It was over. His reign of terror was through. Their lands were safe at last.

"Queen Ironfists," Hiccup coughed weakly, on the ground, clutching a stick so it looked like it was a spike in his chest. "Is it finished? Did you defeat him?"

Hay in her hair, Astrid stepped over to him and stood over the "fallen warrior" solemnly.

"The warlord is no more. My magic axe has had its thirst for blood quenched. The monsters at my castle will feast on his bones. Nothing shall remain." She knelt and rested a hand on his head, silently offering prayer to the gods. "You've fought well, my vassa-no-my _friend_, Prince Madguts. I will never forget your brave deeds and most of all your loyalty to your queen. ...Well, for the time when I was your queen. I can no longer call you my servant and you are free now."

Hiccup gasped. "I give to you my kingdom, now that it is reclaimed from Skunknuts and now that I know I am a prince. And I go now to Valhalla, to be with my forefathers. It was an-an honor to fight... beside you... arrrrrghlararhgle. Bleh."

There was one last dramatic gasp and then Hiccup "died."

Astrid stood, raising her head to the heavens, calling out, "Your memory will be honored! Everyone will remember your kingdom and name throughout all of history!"

Alas, no tears would fall from her eyes. Tough, awesome, Viking/shield-maiden/queens didn't cry. Yet when Hiccup peeked just a tiny bit through his eyelids he saw a strange look on her face, as if, somewhere deep inside her, she was a little dissatisfied with this kind of ending. Maybe too morose?

Falling out of her pretend role and collapsing on her bottom, she exhaled loudly, "I'm beat! How long have we been going for? That was long, but it was pretty fun!"

Hiccup just lay there, sticking his tongue out of the corner of his mouth.

"Uh... Hiccup? Game's over."

She took her stick and poked him.

Hiccup laughed, and swatted the stick away.

"Okay, okay, I'm not dead anymore."

Grinning, she relented and dropped the stick. He peeked one eye open

at her, and then a thoughtful look came over his face. There was a reason he'd chosen the noble sacrifice as his character's little scenario. He liked that he'd "died" a hero, and that Astrid proclaimed he'd always be remembered.

The others didn't seem to like playing with him much anymore. They teased him and called him "Useless," sometimes, like it was his name now. And he annoyed Gobber by getting things wrong in the stall and not being able to lift anything, he could tell. And the other adults in the village seemed irritated whenever he was around.

Worst of all, his dad siiiighed at him all the time. The look on his father's face from earlier was still stuck inside his head. Playing pretend had distracted him for a while, but now those eyes stared at him in disappointment from behind his eyelids every time he closed his own eyes and it bothered him that he didn't really understand what the cause of that disappointment was. All he knew was that it was there, directed at him.

Blinking both eyes open and looking blankly at the blue sky, he asked, well, a 'Hiccup question,' which was generally regarded in the village to be a question about something no one else tended not to think about and took far too much thinking to answer.

"Hey, Astrid? If I was really gone like that... would you miss me?"

She was picking the hay out of her hair when he asked her that and pondered over her answer for a moment. Then she just chuckled, taking it for a pointless question and answered, "What are you saying? You're the son of Stoick the Vast. And that guy can lop off a dragon's head like it's nothing. You're not going anywhere anytime soon."

Sure, he could be a little... different at times, but surely once he was older he'd be crazy strong like his father and his ancestors before him. In her mind, they'd all be something great one day. Her, Hiccup, Ruffnut and Tuffnut, Snotlout, even Fishlegs. Of course, she would be the best, but they'd all be great.

There was a patch of daisies near them, and Hiccup plucked a few, his hands working to knot them together, as he picked away at the knotty questions crowding his mind, "You didn't answer my question. I mean, if I was gone right now, would you miss me? Like if I got eaten by a dragon or something."

Her eyes flickered to what he was doing, bringing her legs up and wrapping her arms around them. Finally, she shrugged, and said, "I guess I would. You're weird, but this is fun. You know? Training is fun, fishing is fun, and I think I like this, too. And no one does this better than you. It makes me wish I could read better. I know my mom has books with stories like the ones you make up."

Hiccup looked ecstatic to hear it. He didn't say what he was thinking, that he was starting to think she would be the only one who would miss him.

"I have some books that are pretty easy to read. I have to sound everything out first, but the woodcuts help. Dad got 'em trading."

"The others think reading is a waste of time. Except Fishlegs. What's up with that?" She leaned back on her arms. "There are great stories about shieldmaidens and warriors and fighting if the book is good."

Hiccup, finally finished with the crown, sat up, reached over, and plopped it on her head. The daisy-crown sagged, going over her left eye and nearly falling off before she blinked and adjusted it.

"Heeey, what's this for?"

Hiccup just shrugged and smiled at her.

"Just 'cause, I guess. A queen needs a crown, right?"

Astrid grinned back a gap-toothed grin, and to Hiccup it was like the sun rising.

3. Part 3

****Disclaimer:** **HTTYD is not mine. No profit is being made.

****Summary:**** A series of snapshots from Hiccup's early years. What childhood influences make a Hiccup? Add one boyhood crush, a tablespoon of Gobber's mentoring, two cups of childhood loneliness and ostracization, and a heaping helping of fatherly disapproval. Stir vigorously. Bake for fifteen years, then leave to cool in the brisk Berk climate.

****Author's notes:**** Thanks for the reviews, guys!

****The Thrush That Can't Fly:** **Yeah, the gender role thing is something that's bothered me sometimes about the fics I've read. The gender dynamics of Berk society are done pretty subtly, but it's eye-opening once you notice them and realize what they are. That there's absolutely no question at all that Astrid and Ruffnut should be fighting and doing dragon-training is pretty freakin' cool, and I figure conversely, it's not really looked down on if a man sews or cleans or cares for their kids. Equality is almost a given there, it looks like. Hope the rest of the fic lives up to your expectations!

****4ever2010:** **The way I see it is there's no way he'd like Astrid if she'd been making fun of him with the others from the start. And she was never shown mocking him in the movie, so what I sort of wondered was: was there possibly a time she was nice to him and they just grew apart?

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><p>Catching the Sun

****By Saphie****

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><p>Part 3

When they were nine, the mocking insults and jeers every time he lost at everything had started to wear on him, so he spent more of his time alone, occupying his time with looking at interesting bugs, drawing in what was to become one of many paper notebooks provided by his father, and, his favorite past-time, annoying the adults around the village with questions.

"Why's the sky blue, instead of, I don't know, green?"

"I have no idea, Hiccup."

"Do you think the gods just decided blue was blue? Or maybe there's something blue past the sky and the sky is clear. Like water? Could it maybe be that?"

"I don't know, Hiccup."

"Do you think the sun would still look gold if the sky was green instead? Do you think there's anything past the sky? I wonder if there's anything past the sky. If it is clear, I wonder if you can go past the blue part-"

"Hiccup, go home."

When he did try to hang out with the other kids, the highlight of most of their afternoons was the near-daily race they had. It took place through an array of obstacles around the town, up and over the docks, through the crates and baskets behind the mill, and around the edge of the fields. Hiccup always placed last, usually struggling for several minutes to climb over the crates and obstacles that the others hopped over in mere seconds.

"Slowpoke!" called Ruffnut as she and Tuffnut ran right by, during one afternoon's race. "C'mon, snail-boy, pick up the pace!"

"If we ever have to run from dragons to avoid getting eaten, at least we know we'd be okay. We only have to run faster than Hiccup!" Tuffnut teased.

Even Fishlegs managed to get over the obstacles faster than Hiccup, usually because of his strong arms. "Guys! Hey guys! I'm not sure if we should be engaging in such vigorous activity after eating lunch! There's a 65% chance we might get cramps!"

Hiccup was getting cramps. His tiny stride meant he had to work twice as hard as the others and he was usually too out of breath to even defend himself against their taunting.

"Look at me, look at me! I'm walking faster than Hiccup can run!" Snotlout said mockingly, half-walking-half-jogging by.

"And I'm running faster than you could ever hope to in your life!" crowed Astrid, quickly zipping past Snotlout and outpacing the others. She'd given them a head start, but it wouldn't do them any good. She turned back to Hiccup and laughed, but it wasn't mocking. It was almost as if she was doing it to say: 'You might not be able to outrun anyone, but I can do enough of it for the both of us.'

Somehow, even though he always placed last and got viciously mocked for it, that was the part Hiccup never minded. Every time he lost, he got to look ahead and see Astrid's golden hair flapping in the breeze, coming loose from her braided pigtails, and he got to hear her wild laughter as she jubilantly beat everyone across the finish line.

"Hurry up, lead-legs!" she always called back breathlessly and yet it always sounded more encouraging than anything else.

"I'm comin'!"

It was part of why he tried his best to not be too slow so he could at least see her win, but as they all got older and she and the others got faster, and he didn't, he found that she was always leaving him farther and farther behind.

4. Part 4

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****By Saphie****

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><p>Part 4

When they were eleven, they started to slowly drift apart like two ships at sea, becalmed and without oars, caught in different currents. It was slow and painful for Hiccup as he watched Astrid wash out of reach. He was starting to realize his place in the village, and it meant realizing that it was no place.

That ruined everything.

"Out of the way, Hiccup!"

"Move, Hiccup!"

"Laddie, if you can't help, get back inside!"

During that particular raid, Hiccup was part of the fire brigade. He was young for it-they were all too young for it-but the attacks had reached an unrelenting fever pitch that didn't seem to be letting up anytime soon. Everyone that was remotely capable of doing something to help had to, and being outside wasn't much more dangerous than

being inside when one of the houses went up in flames. As such, all the young Vikings had been conscripted to run messages or help fight fires.

None of the other kids seemed to have trouble with it. They were Vikings. They'd all been raised to listen, to follow directions, to cooperate with the rest of the tribe. Hiccup had been raised that way too, but he never could quite seem to get it right. When he ran messages, he got overexcited and stuttered and for a boy as sharp as he was, he wasn't the most articulate under pressure. It took too long to get the message out of him. He also had the worst habit of accidentally getting underfoot, which was largely a byproduct of his size and the fact he was well below eye level of most of the adult Vikings.

Today, to his great misery, he found he was even worse at putting out fires than running messages. This was because he could barely carry a bucket when it was empty-forget it about carrying it when it was full. He wound up slopping most of it onto himself, spilling the rest on the ground, getting underfoot anyway, and always turned up at the wrong house at the wrong time, usually because he couldn't keep up with the others.

"Hiccup! Hiccup!" His father hadn't liked him being out in the first place, but he also hadn't liked the idea of leaving him at home when the whole house could be set on fire. This was the first time, though, after letting him out that he said the words Hiccup would soon find himself getting used to hearing on a regular basis.

"Hiccup, get back inside!"

"But dad-"

"This isn't working. Get inside! That's an order!"

For a moment, Hiccup stood there, twisting the handle of the bucket fitfully in his hands, but then a Nadder came swooping down, screeching a horrible warbling screech, blasting the entire street with its white-hot fire. Hiccup ran and tripped, clumsily, and felt himself being yanked out of the way of the flames just in time by one of his father's strong hands. The dropped bucket was reduced to cinders right in the spot he'd just been in.

"I was wrong to let you try to help. You aren't ready yet," Stoick said, expression full of concern and...was that disappointment? Putting his son down, he shoved him in the direction of the forge.

"But dad, I can help!"

"Get in the forge with Gobber." When Hiccup didn't move at first, Stoick barked, "Now!"

Hiccup found himself running even though he didn't want to. His father's orders had a way of making people do what he said without them even thinking about. He passed by Astrid, who had been close enough to hear the entire exchange and whose face was smudged with ash. She was dutifully putting out a small fire and had no trouble at all lifting her bucket because she had taken to lifting buckets full

of water each day for _practice._

She gave him a look of sympathy, but she only had a moment for that look because she had a job to do and duty came first. Turning back to her work, her face set itself into grim lines of determination and then she didn't look at him again. The way he faded into the background, into unimportance, stung in ways he didn't really understand, and Hiccup swallowed down shame as he ran to the safety of the forge and of Gobber's menial tasks.

After the battle, the other villagers were talking about him. He heard them speaking quietly to his father, passing on carefully-worded concern. There were only snippets and his name, but it was enough. He caught "nuisance" and "always underfoot" and "can't lift a bucket to save his life." There was "needs to stay inside" and "have to keep him out of the way." Stoick looked troubled by what he was hearing, but wasn't denying any of it. There were what sounded like quiet assurances coming from his lips. No, he wouldn't let Hiccup out into the fray again. It was too soon. He wasn't strong enough, that was clear.

Hiccup edged over to the other kids, trying to put some distance between himself and the whispers. They were all slouched over on the rock ledge that led to the hill where he and his father's house was.

"Some battle, huh, guys?" he asked, in tones of gentle camaraderie, arms swinging back and forth, clapping lightly in front of him. Their faces were all streaked with ash and their skin was slicked with sweat. Ruffnut's hair had come slightly undone from her usual braids and somehow Snotlout had gotten a cut on his chin. Hiccup was suddenly acutely aware of his relatively clean clothes and lack of cool injuries.

"Yeah, like you would know," said Tuffnut with a sneer. "You were in the forge the whole time while the rest of us were out doing all the cool stuff."

"I was-I was doing cool stuff. I was doing lots of cool stuff with Gobber. Loads of coolâ€¦things."

"Seriously. Hiccup. You couldn't even lift a bucket," Snotlout teased. "_Seriously. _What are your arms made of? Yarn?"

"No. They're made of, y'know, meat. Vikingâ€¦meat." He flexed a puny muscle, and then stopped when he saw Ruff, Tuff, and Snotlout rolling their eyes.

Hiccup looked to Fishlegs, who was usually more friendly towards him than the others, but Fishlegs was looking everywhere besides Hiccup's face. Then he looked to Astrid. She was shaking her head slightly, and then she turned to go. She wouldn't meet his gaze.

But she did at least say: "Leave him alone, you guys. He was trying."

Grumbling amongst themselves, the others at least listened and all turned to go. Hiccup watched Astrid walk away with his head hanging and knots twisting up into even bigger knots in his stomach.

From then on, the hard part was getting her to look at him in the eyes.

5. Part 5

****Disclaimer: ****HTTYD is not mine. No profit is being made.

****Summary:**** A series of snapshots from Hiccup's early years. What childhood influences make a Hiccup? Add one boyhood crush, a tablespoon of Gobber's mentoring, two cups of childhood loneliness and ostracization, and a heaping helping of fatherly disapproval. Stir vigorously. Bake for fifteen years, then leave to cool in the brisk Berk climate.

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><p>Catching the Sun

****By Saphie****

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><p>Part 5

When they were twelve, he and Astrid had mostly stopped talking.

Every so often, he'd try to hang out with the other kids, hoping against hope that they'd get the mocking and teasing out of their systems. When a romp through the nearby woods led to rough-housing and Snotlout shoving him off the rope bridge and into the stream to the raucous laughter of the others, he was quickly disabused of that notion. He wasn't fast enough, he wasn't strong enough, and he said too many things that were straight-out weird, even weirder than the things Fishlegs said. Fishlegs had much higher regard in the eyes of the others than Hiccup-despite all the odd stuff he said, Fishlegs could lift a war-hammer now, a real, full-sized hammer, which was more even than Snotlout could do.

Astrid hadn't been there the day he'd been shoved into the stream, though, and when she was there, she tended to smack whoever was responsible for shoving him or making fun of him, something that made Hiccup terribly grateful.

He couldn't stand being mocked so unrelentingly and yet wanted to be able to hang out with the others so much it hurt. In the end, twisting it all inward was the only way to reconcile everything. He was weird and he was weak. If he could just fix it, if he could do something to prove himself, everyone would like him, and it could be like it was when they were all very young, when there seemed a chance he could grow up to be strong someday, when they almost liked having him around.

Most days, though, Hiccup found himself a loner by necessity rather than choice and could be found wandering aimlessly the island during his free time. The woods around Berk were full of interesting things to draw, and he still hadn't entirely ruled out the possibility of the existence of trolls, even though none of his sock-traps had been

tripped. There were holes to poke sticks into, and angry animals to run away from after sticks were poked into their burrows, and notes to take about the behavior of said animals from where he took refuge in the branches of trees. He wanted to figure out answers to all the questions that could be asked that seemed obvious only to him. How exactly did birds fly? Why were some animals bright colors and others in drab greys and browns? What actually made the wind blow?

Sometimes he would spend a whole day lying in the grass somewhere, staring at the sky, thinking interesting thoughts that he felt like he couldn't share with anyone else in the whole world.

Avoiding the other kids his age had the unfortunate side effect of making it so he didn't see Astrid in more than fleeting glimpses around the village. She was training harder now, starting to take the prospect of fighting dragons very seriously. Between her training schedule and him avoiding her when she was with the others, he didn't really get to talk to her much. Days passed in between talking at first, then weeks, and after that anytime he did talk to her was awkward and halting, like they barely knew each other when they'd grown up in the same village and known each other all their lives.

At least he had Gobber to talk to. Because he was willing to listen to Hiccup, he often had to deal with his endless chattering, but he put up with it with incredible patience.

That said, Hiccup had long since come to realize that sometimes he simply tuned him out when the rambling got to be a little much.

"-so I was thinking about why exactly water reflects things when it's still, and I think it has to have something to do with light. Because if you really look at it, when a bright light shines on still water, the light that shines back is pretty bright. Somehow, it-it's able to take the light and send it back."

"That's nice, Hiccup."

"-only I can't really test anything, because you can't do more than see light. It's not like you can measure light, right?"

"Sure thing, Hiccup."

Hiccup frowned at the etching he was working on. (He couldn't lift things in the forge, but he had a great eye for detail.)

"And so I was thinking of climbing up on top of the Great Hall, setting it on fire, and dancing naked in an invocation of the gods summon Thor to bring down a rainstorm to put it out, just to show everyone I can," he said in matter-of-fact tones.

"Good idea, Hiccup."

Hiccup looked up from his work and frowned.

"You're not listening. Again."

Gobber looked up from his own work. "You're talking an awful lot. Again," he said good-naturedly. "There's work to be done and it's nae

going to do itself. You can chatter all you like but yours might get done faster if you move your hands as quickly as that mouth o' yours."

Hiccup's mouth snapped shut and he went back to work, a sullen look on his face. Gobber let the silence carry on for a good long while, punctuating it with the occasional slam of his hammer.

Noticing the sulking of his apprentice, eventually he said, "Sorry, lad, but sometimes my ears get near worn out when you're around." He twisted off his hammer attachment and put on the tongs. "Why don't you save all this chatter for your friends?"

Hiccup's mouth opened slowly, and then snapped shut again. He didn't look up from his etching. Gobber ground his uneven teeth together slightly, lines of concern creasing around his eyes.

"What about Astrid?"

He knew Hiccup had always been on slightly friendlier terms with the girl, but Hiccup's complete silence on that subject and total absorption in his work spoke volumes. It spoke whole _libraries_, even.

Gobber didn't ask whether Hiccup had tried yammering at his father about this stuff. The boy had been doing it for twelve odd years and he knew it just baffled his best friend. The disconnect there was alarming sometimes, but Stoick was a stubborn man, Hiccup was a stubborn boy, and Gobber had no idea how to bridge the gap over a chasm that had stretched that wide.

There was near silence in the forge for a little while, other than the crackle of the fire and the hissing of hot metal in the water of the slack tub.

Finally, Gobber said warmly, "Alright, alright, I'm listenin'. Start from the beginning. Light, water, you've got _ideas_, right? Of course you do. What are they?"

Hiccup looked up at the blacksmith and written in the lines of Hiccup's face were words of gratitude that he didn't have actual words for.

* * *

><p>One afternoon, during his wandering through the woods, he heard a strange "thock," over and over again, like the pecking of a wood-pecker in extremely slow motion. Climbing over some boulders, he peeked around a tree and-<p>

"AAUGH!"

"HICCUP!"

Hardly any time seemed to pass between the moment he saw the axe leave her hand and the moment it was almost upon him. She'd almost managed to stop herself from throwing it, but hadn't reacted quickly enough and so it wobbled in its arc through the air. If it had been a larger axe, his head would have probably been cleaved in two. As it stood, the throwing axe passed perilously close to his face on its

way towards hitting the tree and he was left standing next to where it was stuck, staring at it bug-eyed.

In shock over his close call, he fell backwards right onto his butt.

So apparently the woods were where Astrid went to practice. Good to know.

"Hiccup, you idiot! I could have hit you! What's your problem, sneaking up on me like that?"

"I didn't know you were here!" he said turning to her.

As soon as she did, she immediately covered her mouth with her hands.

"You're bleeding!"

"I am?" Suddenly realizing there was a feeling like something was trickling down his chin, he reached up his hand up to where the wet feeling was coming from and when he pulled it away, it was smeared with blood. The axe had perhaps passed closer to his face than he'd originally thought; close enough to nick it as it spun around. "I'm bleeding!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Why are we yelling?"

"I don't know!"

Astrid took a deep breath and rushed over to him, pulling out the cloth she used to clean her axe from one of the pouches on her belt.

"Don't pick at it, don't pick at it," she said as he prodded at it, and she lightly slapped his hand away. She held the cloth to his chin, putting on pressure.

"Ow! Ow ow ow!"

"Don't be a baby, it's just a nick," she said, frowning, and then the harsh expression on her face faded as she held the cloth there. "I'm really sorry."

He sat there for a moment, just staring up at her. She'd changed her hair. He hadn't even seen her recently enough to notice when she'd done it. Gone were the plaited pigtails that stuck out along the sides of her head. Now her hair was in a single braid at the back of her head and her bangs were starting to grow out.

Her eyes were still just as bright and sharp-looking as ever.

For a fleeting moment, he felt full of something when he looked at her. Looking back on it later, he would remember it as painful and wonderful at the same time, an ache in his chest that he couldn't explain, something pure and admiring, lacking both desire and limits.

"Hi. Hey. Hi Astrid," he finally said awkwardly. "Haven't seen you in a while." He paused awkwardly and then corrected himself, "Well, I have seen you. Around the village. But I've only seen you in the sense that I saw you. With my eyes. I haven't seen you as in talked to you orâ€"or anything like talking. In the visiting sense. Of seeing someone. And having a conversation."

Deciding that he'd stammered and embarrassed himself enough, he cut himself off.

Somehow, even though she was looking _right at him_, she still didn't really meet his gaze.

"I've been busy," she finally said. It wasn't said coldly, but there was some distance in her voice.

It was also the truth. He could hear it in how she said it.

There was an awkward silence between them for a good long while as she knelt there, holding the cloth to his face. Eventually, he felt weird just staring at her and his gaze wandered around the little clearing.

"Practicing?"

"Pretty much."

Awkward silence again.

"That was really impressive," he offered. "The way you threw that." Another awkward pause. "At my face."

"It was sloppy," Astrid said in an honest appraisal of herself. "You surprised me."

There was some more of that wonderful awkward silence.

Finally, she said, "I think it's scabbing up already. You might even get a cool scar out of it. You should probably go home and clean it. You can keep the cloth."

She left the cloth to Hiccup, and stood up to go pull her axe out of the tree. Hiccup climbed to his feet, holding the cloth to his face, and for a moment, he stood there, watching her, trying to think of something to say, trying to think of just the right thing to say to get her talking to him again, but she raised both her eyebrows at him.

"You really should go." She frowned when he kept standing there slack-jawed. "I don't like people watching me practice."

Hiccup knew without asking that it was because she didn't like people to see when she messed up, just like it bothered her when they were all younger and she messed up a tumble or a flip in front of them all.

He struggled for a moment, trying to figure out something, anything, he could say that would make her want him to stay, but he couldn't actually think of anything particularly compelling.

So he turned to go, leaving the silence behind him, wondering if he'd lost something important or if he'd never had it in the first place.

6. Part 6

****Disclaimer: ****HTTYD is not mine. No profit is being made.

****Summary:**** A series of snapshots from Hiccup's early years. What childhood influences make a Hiccup? Add one boyhood crush, a tablespoon of Gobber's mentoring, two cups of childhood loneliness and ostracization, and a heaping helping of fatherly disapproval. Stir vigorously. Bake for fifteen years, then leave to cool in the brisk Berk climate.

****Author's Note: ****This is the part of the fic I wasn't sure about doing but wanted to do anyway. What I wanted to try here was depicting a teenage boy starting to get all hormonal and lusty because it's a natural thing that happens when many people hit puberty. I've seen people argue that Hiccup was interested in Astrid because of her looks, and I think there is some physical attraction there. But I also think he's attracted to her because of her character. I wanted to write about a teenage boy dealing with those feelings WITHOUT reducing the girl he's interested in into just a sexual object, and connect his admiration of her character with those feelings. I don't know if I pulled it off; that's up for you readers to decide. So let me know what you think!

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><p>Catching the Sun

****By Saphie****

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><p>Part 6

When Hiccup was thirteen, he had the occasional really, really embarrassing dream about Astrid. The sort of dreams he assumed she'd murder him for if she ever found out. He also started noticing things about her, little details he hadn't noticed before, like the fact that her formerly very stick-like body shape was getting...rounder in places. Sometimes, in the Great Hall, he would peek over at her and get somewhat absorbed in how her lips moved when she talked with the other people at her table.

This increased the awkwardness between them to near-astronomical levels.

For a while, Hiccup wasn't really sure what was happening to him, until his father happened to peek in his room at the worst time imaginable to tell him to clear out some of the junk he'd left scattered downstairs and found him...well. The less said the better. In any case, after the initial mutual mortal embarrassment, Stoick had spoken to Hiccup about being a "late-bloomer," and how maybe it meant now he might start growing a little (finally) and about how there was going to be changes that he would notice about himself. So

one agonizingly awkward talk with Stoick and one marginally less awkward and far more informative talk with Gobber later and Hiccup understood what was happening to himself a little better.

It put a new wrinkle in the whole Astrid thing, though. Part of him ached for the days that she paid attention to him and longed for innocent sunny afternoons out in the fields with hay scattered around. Another part of him ached for her to pay attention to him and longed for not-so-innocent sunny afternoons out in the fields with hay scattered around. That's what the older teens sometimes got caught doing, anyway. They'd wander out and come back with hay in their hair, and get eyeballed by the older villagers. Now Hiccup finally knew what they'd been up to.

Sometimes Hiccup wondered if he'd ever know what that was like. He wasn't exactly a fine specimen of Vikingry and it was becoming more and more apparent that it wasn't just a stage he had to grow out of. Puberty schmuberty, most Vikings were walking boulders by his age. He wished his father was right about him finally growing, but he doubted it.

Then there was the whole him-being-the-village-pariah thing.

Who would ever, ever want someone like him?

The hopeless tangle of emotions and weird urges made it nearly impossible to talk to Astrid, especially since he felt rather guilty for the latter. Even when he did find himself around her, Hiccup's palms got sweaty, he felt like his lungs were seizing up, and if he managed to say something at all, it usually sounded stupid and involved a lot more stuttering than his talking to her once had.

Astrid was Astrid. She'd been one of the only people in the village his age that he thought might have almost been a friend. She was smart, and driven, and tough, and determined, and had the capacity to be kind even if she didn't have the inclination. She was just overall completely amazing, as far as he was concerned. To think about things other than that, when thinking about her just seemed...crude. Well, cruder than even Vikings were supposed to be.

But the two seemed to feed in on themselves. The more amazing she got, the more he found her occupying his thoughts, in ways that were both wholesome and...not so much. And with as many dragon raids as they were getting, she had plenty of opportunities to be amazing.

* * *

><p>"Wow! Did you see that? Bob the Sled just got a Gronckle by jumping off the roof of the mill," Hiccup enthused.<p>

There was a dragon raid going on. Business as usual. Hiccup was watching out the wide window of the forge, leaning slightly outside, watching the explosions of fire blooming all over the village, and the Vikings trying to hammer and stab and slice every winged thing in sight. Then Astrid went running by with the other teens, buckets in hand, and Hiccup leaned out the window to get a better look.

"Eyes on yer work, Hiccup!" Gobber called out, hammering away, then seeing the boy lean out even farther to look at Astrid's

retreating...figure, Gobber rolled his eyes and grabbed him by his collar and dragged him back into the shop. "That, by the way, is not yer work."

Flushing slightly and looking everywhere but Gobber, Hiccup got back to work, struggling to lift some of the damaged weapons into the hearth, and jumping up and down to put his full body weight on the bellows.

"I need to get out there, Gobber," he puffed as he jumped.

"Someday, Hiccup. Someday."

"No, like, today."

"No, like, someday," Gobber said, imitating the teen's voice. "Far faaar in the future. Your father's right. You're nowhere near ready yet. Look what happened when you tried to go out there two months ago-tried to lift an axe, dropped it on Ack's foot-he nearly lost two of his toes."

"Okay, first of all, I didn't drop it. Per se. The force from a nearby explosion knocked it out of my hands and Ack just happened to be standing unfortunately close. Secondly, he still has both those toes. Thirdly-I feel really bad about it, so please stop reminding me. Everyone in the village only just stopped calling me Hiccup the Toe-Foe last week."

Hiccup stopped working the bellows for just a moment to catch his breath. "I just-I just have to find another way. That's all. To fight dragons."

"There is no other way to fight dragons besides fighting dragons. It takes good old-fashioned Vikingry," Gobber said, waving his hammer-for-a-hand around emphatically.

Hiccup shot him a level look. "So, you're saying I'm not a Viking. Because I can't fight dragons."

"I didn' say that now, did I?" Gobber evaded carefully. "I will note for the record that I personally have never said that."

There was a long pause as Hiccup considered something. People whispered about him, called him weak, said he was a nuisance, said he was always in the way. Some made jokes about him, when they thought he wasn't around to hear-those hurt. But he'd never really considered...

"Has-has anyone else said that then?" he asked slowly, his voice very quiet, the very idea painful. "That I wasn't a Viking?"

Gobber was as good a liar as any Viking, but he had a soft spot where Hiccup was concerned, and for a moment, just for a moment, his face was stricken. Then his expression smoothed out to something far more casual.

"Noooo, o' course not. Who'd say something like that? Haven't heard anything like that, and you know I hear everything. The only one that knows more about what goes on around here besides me is your dad."

Hiccup bit back his next question, fearing the answer. He couldn't ask how his father felt about it. If his dad didn't think he was a Viking, he wasn't sure what he'd do.

There was a loud shrieking noise, calls of "Night Fury! Get down!" and the pounding thrum of an explosion and Hiccup ran to the window again, leaning outside to watch the excitement, the weapons quickly forgotten. He saw his father leading the other Vikings outside, shield raised, utterly fearless.

"Aim the catapults towards the western fields!" he bellowed in a voice that rang through the entire village, in tones that almost demanded thoughtless compliance.

Seeing Hiccup at the window again, Gobber rolled his eyes again, grabbed Hiccup by the collar again, and set him back down inside the shop again. Other than the stringy arms, he wasn't the worst apprentice a blacksmith could have—he was right clever and had figured out certain things about metallurgy just through observation. But all the cleverness in the world didn't do much in the face of the boy having the attention span of a squirrel. Gobber found firm, _specific _instructions worked best.

"Weapons. Bellows. Now."

Hiccup dutifully went back to the bellows. "I know I can do something more, Gobber. I just need to figure out how."

"I'm sure you will, Hiccup," Gobber said comfortingly. "Just give it time, lad. You can't go out there until you can handle yourself. What are you losing by waiting, really?"

His father's love, his village's respect, friends, the attention of the girl he was having weird, squirmy, frequently-embarrassing feelings for...

_Only __**everything**__, _Hiccup thought, as he pumped the bellows.

There was another explosion or at least the sound of something groaning and caving in itself. Sometimes noises like that were hard to tell apart.

"She's trapped! She's trapped, someone get her out!"

There was a little girl, screaming, the screams muffled.

"The walls collapsed! Crossbeams are in the way!"

"Move them!"

"They're on fire! And they're the only thing holding up the roof now!"

"Put it out! Astrid, get the brigade over here!"

"On it!" the girl called, leading the other teens over.

The ruckus was enough to get both Hiccup and Gobber looking at one

another and then rushing out of the stall. A group of Viking was gathered around a house nearby that was partly collapsed.

"The Uggersons' little girl is in there!"

"There's a gap, can anyone fit through?"

"Too small!"

Vikings were trying to put out the fire so they could lift or chop the beams out of the way and get the girl out in time, before the house burned down with her inside it, but it was starting to look grim. Hiccup watched helplessly as Gobber ran over to help, as the screaming got louder from the inside. There were horrible creaking groans from the rest of the house.

"Listen to the roof-sounds like it's about to collapse any minute!"

"Break the beams, just break the beams!"

"Out of my way!" It looked like Spitelout was about to just break his way in with his axe, fire be damned, but the effort would probably kill him and collapse the rest of the roof on the little girl inside. The crowd knew it, Spitelout knew it...

Astrid knew it. She poured one last bucketful of water on the flames and then, suddenly, a steely look came over her face, and she threw her bucket aside. There was a gap in the burning beams. It wasn't large enough for an adult Viking to fit through. But someone smaller...

"Oh no," Hiccup murmured, seeing the expression that came over her face, figuring out what she was doing before the others did. "Oh no, Astrid, don't! Don't!"

"What's she doing?"

Moving around Spitelout, with a running jump, Astrid dove through the fiery gap between the burning beams and into the house.

"Astrid, no!" called out Gobber.

"The Hofferson girl just dove in there!"

The roof was still groaning, it was starting to cave in, the other Vikings were about to try forcing their way in anyway, a horrified yell was building in Hiccup's throat-

-and Astrid came diving out between the beams again with a bundle wrapped in her arms, carefully rolled using her shoulders and forearm and landed in a heap outside the building just as it collapsed in itself with a deafening crash. She was coughing horribly and so was the bundled up little girl, and both were singed and covered in soot-but they were alive.

There were cheers all around and they quickly gathered around Astrid and the little girl, tending to them both.

"Well done, lassie! Well done!"

"-bravest thing I've seen this entire fight and I saw Glurk taking on two Monstrous Nightmares at once, so that's saying something-

"-wait 'til the Hoffersons hear about this. After the double heart attacks, they'll be so proud of the lass-

Astrid, for her part, didn't seem to care much about the praise or fussing of the others. She merely looked at the little girl, who was clinging to her, in relief. She also almost looked surprised at herself.

"You're okay," she said in a hoarse voice to the girl. "It's okay."

What she'd done wasn't about praise for her, about other people thinking she was a good Viking.

It was about being a good Viking, about doing what she could to help the tribe, and about being what she needed to be to do it. She had to be the best, because they were fighting a never-ending war.

They needed the best.

Snotlout, who'd been standing there with the other teens that were in the fire brigade, was clinging to his bucket awkwardly and looking toward Astrid in relief and admiration. She had effectively prevented his father from knocking his way in and who knew if he would've survived it.

Hiccup, who was standing there with his hand over his fluttering heart, relieved and astonished, wondered if there was every any point at all that Astrid would stop leaving him completely blown away.

7. Part 7

****Disclaimer:** **HTTYD is not mine. No profit is being made.

****Summary:**** A series of snapshots from Hiccup's early years. What childhood influences make a Hiccup? Add one boyhood crush, a tablespoon of Gobber's mentoring, two cups of childhood loneliness and ostracization, and a heaping helping of fatherly disapproval. Stir vigorously. Bake for fifteen years, then leave to cool in the brisk Berk climate.

****Author's Note:**** Some parts of this chapter come from my RP with astridhofferson on LJ and are being used with her permission. Kara is awesome. Just giving credit where it's due.

* * *

><p>Catching the Sun

****By Saphie****

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><p>Part 7

When Hiccup was thirteen and a half, he figured out what he could do. Maybe he couldn't fight dragons with his muscles, but he could make things that fought dragons _for _him. This never really worked out well, though, and neither did some of the other "improvements" he tried to implement around the village. The pump system he'd thought up to help fight fires was particularly disastrous. It was a good idea in theoryâ€”the bucket brigades barely put a dent in the flames sometimes, especially where Nadders were concerned. In execution, it ended with a drenched Hiccup following a drenched Astrid back to her house, leaving behind a bunch of drenched and angry villagers, who were busy prying wood from an exploded rolling water-cask from the outside walls of buildings.

Since Astrid was always on bucket duty, he'd hoped that she'd be really impressed that he made her job easier.

It hadn't really worked out that way.

"I'm not crazy, I just-you know, I thought it'd be a better idea than just waiting in the stall. I didn't really think all the water would get _that _pressurized."

He was trying to explain to her, because, like everyone else, she had that Look on her face. He was getting so tired of that Look, but he especially didn't want it to be on her face.

"What else is new? You created another stupid...thing," she shot at him. "And it blew up in your face."

Again. Just like three days ago. And the day before that. And the day before that. Even when he was scolded by his father for it, he still persisted.

"Are you done talking to me now?" she went on rather coldly. "I have to get changed."

He looked...hurt, and almost visibly flinched at her sharp tone. This was the longest he'd talked to her in a while, though. Even if there was anger there, they were still talking.

"I think I know what went wrong. I could-I could show you. I have all the plans at the forge-we could go hang out, and I can show you what I was trying to do. I think you'd be impress-"

"Stop."

"But Astrid, I-"

"Hiccup. Stop."

They hadn't played since they were younger. Now he just wandered around the island and did the weird...Hiccup things he did.

"But-"

"_Stop._"

_How does Gobber put up with this? _she wondered. Didn't he get the message when she deliberately would walk past him and not say anything?

"I'm getting changed. Then I'm going to go train. Then I'm going to help fix up some of the buildings that got set on fire in the raid. Then I'm going to eat supper, do more chores, and after that I'm sleeping. 'Hanging out' is just a waste of my time. There's too much to do that's important."

"I just thought, y'know, we haven't talked in a while, and I really think if I could just show you..."

Astrid, for her part, swore she could hear the sound of the last of her patience snapping. She shook her head at him, nearly astonished with his ignorance.

"What do you think we are? We're not eight anymore, Hiccup! Playtime is over. Our very futures are at stake."

Or at least hers was. All these raids would mean trouble for Berk's future as well. Her barrage of words continued, shooting into him like arrow after arrow.

"Maybe if you spent more time practicing and trying to get stronger like I do, instead of screwing around, you wouldn't cause trouble all the time for the village. You're the son of the chief! Do you even understand what that means? You're going to have to lead us someday, and I don't know how you're going to do that if you can't get your head out of the clouds for more than five minutes."

"I know I'm not as strong as everyone else, but I just-"

Seeing the hard look on her face, he cut himself off before she could, knowing that what he said next didn't matter, and looked utterly miserable.

Seeing his expression, her own went softer, and her blue eyes looked a little less cold.

"It isn't who or what you are that's the problem. It's what you _do_ about it. You wander around the island with your little notebook drawing pictures instead of practicing. You're always looking for the easy way to do things instead of the way that takes hard work. And training. And it always hurts the village somehow."

She jabbed a finger in his scrawny chest.

"You could have hurt someone today." She shook her head at him, slowly, as if she couldn't believe that someone so smart could make the kinds of thoughtless mistakes he did. "You really need to take a long, hard look at yourself, Hiccup. That's all I have to say to you right now."

With that, she turned around, walked into her house, and slammed the door shut in his face.

For the longest time, he just stood there, looking at her closed door, speechless. Finally, he turned and started walking down the

road. Somehow, he found himself back at home again, without being aware of any of the time that had passed as he walked. He was shivering horribly by the time he got there from his wet clothes.

His father was sitting by the fire, his back to the door, and Hiccup winced at the sight of him. His pretty-much-terrible day was about to get worse. He tried to sneak up up the stairs like he had many times before, but the creaking of the stairs gave him away.

"Hiccup."

He hated that tone. The anger mixed in with the disappointment. All of it barely contained, leaking out into his father's voice despite his father's best efforts to be calm, to be...well, stoic. Hiccup walked backwards down the stairs, and stood at the foot of them, his head hanging.

"I'm grounded, right?" he asked. "For how long?"

"Possibly until Ragnorak. I'm still thinkin' about it." Hiccup winced as his father started shaking his head. "Why can't you _listen_? I told you to stay in the stall."

"I just-I wanted to surprise everyone." And impress Astrid. "I thought, you know, I could rig up something to improve how we deliver water to the fires around the village. I just_ over_improved it. A little."

"It left us without water when we needed it most! Do you know how many buildings we could've saved if you hadn't blown that cask up?"

"Probably not that many, given how inefficient the whole bucket thing is actually-" Hiccup said, gesturing with his hands.

"Hiccup!"

Hiccup shut his mouth immediately, recognizing the 'stop backtalking me' tone of voice. Lately, he seemed to be getting that tone no matter what he said.

Stoick pinched the bridge of his nose. "What am I going to do with you, Hiccup?"

"Let me fight dragons," Hiccup said immediately.

"You're not ready."

"Dad, I'll figure something out. I just need to get out there and then-"

Then everything would get better. He wouldn't be stuck doing things like trying to improve on their firefighting system and having it blow up in his face. (Literally.) He'd be out there being a real Viking, doing real Viking things, and then everything would be okay. People would stop talking about him like he was the plague, the other teens would respect him, Astrid would like him...

"I said _no_."

Hiccup just glowered, staring at the floor.

"You're not strong enough," Stoick went on, stating what was pretty much fact. "How can you fight dragons when you can't even lift an axe without costing someone else their toes?"

"Hey. First of all, I didn't drop the axe, per se-"

Stoick facepalmed. "Hiccup."

He sighed, and that was the worst part. Stoick usually wasn't that harsh when talking to him, but always, there was that look of disappointment on his face. Like Hiccup just didn't measure up.

Like he wished he had someone else for a son.

"Now get to bed," said Stoick, pointing towards the stairs. "You're staying in your room for the rest of the day."

The day had gotten to him, and Hiccup felt like being contrary for no reason, so he crossed his arms. "I'm not tired. It's early."

"Don't make me tell you again."

"Not. Tired."

"Do you want to be stuck in the house _past _Ragnorak now? That's what you're pushing for, son."

"I want to-I want-"

For a moment, he stood there, jaw working, his mouth opening and closing, trying to find the words he could never find, trying to figure out what he could say to make his father understand how lost he felt, how out of place he was, how so many important things were _missing_ from his life, like friends, and the girl he liked actually tolerating him, and respect, and Stoick being proud of him, and, y'know, actually _liking himself._

Gods, he wanted to be able to like himself.

But the words didn't come. They never came, and even if they did come, he wasn't sure his father would even really listen. Hiccup finally closed his mouth and for a moment, he looked pained. For a moment, Stoick saw that pain and almost understood or maybe at least wanted to understand, but then the moment was gone.

Hiccup's expression went blank, and without another word, he turned and bolted for the door. He had to get out of the house, felt like he was crawling out of his skin. So he ran and kept running into the woods, until his father's voice calling out the front door was lost on the wind.

He was shaking by the time he found himself in one of the clearings in the woods, from the cold and from something else.

Noticing a patch of daisies there, like he'd made into crowns for Astrid's hair when they were younger, he picked up a stick, and he

thrashed at them, trying to destroy every. Single. One.

"She is never. Ever. Going to like you. Never. Ever. Because you're _you_. Because you can't be anyone other than _you_."

Letting out a cry of frustration, and throwing the stick as far as he could-which wasn't far-he dropped to his knees.

"Vikings don't cry, Vikings don't cry..." he muttered to himself, rubbing at his face, and then his hands went to his hair. He tugged on it, miserably, rocking in place, trying to hold everything in.

Astrid had been the closest thing he'd had to a friend and it turned out she just...wasn't one, and even worse: had plenty of reasons to not want to be. He'd failed once more at doing something that would impress the village. His dad was disappointed in him yet _again_.

Every time he tried to be useful, it blew up in his face, but he couldn't be useful the normal ways, because he was weak.

Eventually, he sat there in the grass, shoulders slumped, staring at nothing, trembling all over.

I can't do this anymore.

He couldn't. It hurt being this exposed, wanting it this badly.

And because he couldn't handle it, just like that, something inside him shut off. Whatever was left of the sweet, earnest little boy that made daisy crowns went quiet. Almost for good.

"You're an idiot," he muttered to himself, deadpan. "Get used to it."

He'd always defended himself from the others with sarcasm, because even if he had a weak body, he had a quicker mind, but that was when the sarcasm started in full force. The extreme self-deprecation. It hurt too much to leave himself exposed.

And it became very clear, very quickly, that the best thing for him to do was kill a dragon.

Fighting dragons became an obsession. He went over his projects and plans laboriously again and again, searching for flaws to weed out and components to improve. He kept his notebook next to his bed so he could wake up, light a candle, and scribble down notes if he had some breakthrough in bed. He lived and breathed dragons, daydreamed gears and bolas, and mulled over trajectories before he went to sleep. Would it be better if it was something that shot blades or bolas? Should it shoot a net? What if he hit one and it went down over the sea where he wouldn't have proof?

His need for the others to accept him gnawed at him, but that feeling was dulled when he was working. His father scolded him time and time again, after each invention failed, after each time he claimed he hit a dragon but the search parties found nothing, but he couldn't stop.

He was in too deep now. He'd made mistakes far too many times. There was no longer a way to cut his losses and walk away. If he stopped, he'd have nothing, and that was all he'd ever have. But if he could just kill one dragon, just one, then he could fix his whole life. He could make his father proud. Everyone would finally like him. Astrid would finally like him.

And maybe, just maybe, he could stop waking up in the morning feeling disappointed that he woke up as himself, because he'd be someone that was actually worthy of being liked.

8. Part 8

****Disclaimer:** **HTTYD is not mine. No profit is being made.

****Summary:**** A series of snapshots from Hiccup's early years. What childhood influences make a Hiccup? Add one boyhood crush, a tablespoon of Gobber's mentoring, two cups of childhood loneliness and ostracization, and a heaping helping of fatherly disapproval. Stir vigorously. Bake for fifteen years, then leave to cool in the brisk Berk climate.

****Author's Note:**** I'd like to apologize for taking so long to finish this story. My home life got really bad for a while because of an abusive situation and fic was the least of my priorities. I've also now taken to working on my original writing quite a bit lately. For that reason, I'm leaving fanfic behind (Gasp! Shock! Horror!) because I really want to try my best to get published. The good thing is that means I've been making quite a bit of progress on my first novel. If you like my writing and would possibly like to see original writing from me, follow me on tumblr or twitter (kirajlane, for both) to be kept abreast of what I'm working on. My next novel after the one I'm working on right now is going to be co-written with my best friend and is a young adult fantasy/adventure novel with a Viking protagonist. While it's going to be humor-heavy, it's going to be very different from HTTYD and often much darker in tone, but HTTYD got me interested in Vikings and me and my friend came up with an original story involving Vikings and samurai that we think has legs. I definitely think you cool cats might like it.

* * *

><p>Catching the Sun

****By Saphie****

* * *

><p>Part 8

When Hiccup was fifteen, no one believed that he'd downed a dragon. This probably had to do with the fact that he'd caused utter mayhem in the village, yet again, while doing it.

Perhaps it was a good thing that they hadn't believed him, given what happened after, because that dragon wasn't dead, and that dragon had gradually come to trust him, and that dragon had gradually become his friend (not his first friend, but the first he'd had in a long while

and the only one he had for now). Hiccup started winning constantly in the dragon-training ring because of it.

Astrid couldn't stand it.

After all that, Hiccup killed his first dragon. It was probably the largest dragon ever killed by a Viking of Berk. His victory didn't come without a cost. Astrid couldn't stand that either, for entirely different reasons.

Astrid sat by his bedside on some days, his father on others, and Gobber on yet others still, when everyone else needed a break. Toothless, on the other hand, rarely took breaks, opting to spend most of his time at the boy's side.

The fever had been the frightening part. It had already taken hold of him as Astrid flew him back over the sea to Berk on the Nadder that was quickly becoming hers, but after quite a few days, it had finally broken. The first few times he'd woken up had been the worst because he'd been in the most pain then. The herbs the village healer had him on kept him out for long periods of time but when they still needed to feed him and take care of his basic needs so he didn't starve or dehydrate, she weaned him off enough to get him mostly awake. It had been heartbreaking for the people helping to take care of him to see him thrashing around, nearly insensate to his surroundings but knowing something was wrong, feeling the agony of his lost limb. He'd screamed. He'd wept from the pain. After he choked down some bread and broth and plenty of water, after they'd helped him use the pot, the drugged release of the herbs had been a relief not only for him but for those that had to hear his screams.

A few times, they hadn't woken him soon enough and he'd messed the bed in his sleep. His father had cleaned him up, washed him, cleaned up the bed, and dressed him in new clothes, instead of the healer, reasoning that he'd done it plenty of times when he'd been a baby, and that it wasn't any different right now, with him in such a vulnerable state. He cared for his son without complaint, as if trying to make up for all the years he did complain. Openly. Loudly. Sometimes where Hiccup could hear.

In fact, they had not seen their chief so vulnerable in years, not since he'd tenderly taken care of his son when he was a baby, not since he'd shut down when his wife had been lost at sea and the wreckage of her ship found on a nearby island. For the most part, he didn't show it in public, but due to the transition, there was a constant stream of people ducking in and out of the house, to relay news or get orders, and they saw Stoick fussing over his son like he was a newborn, failing utterly at hiding his concern.

No one thought less of him for it.

It had gotten better over time, and they were all fairly certain that because of the herbs, Hiccup wasn't going to remember any of it. He didn't seem to remember each time he woke up that he'd woken up before. Right now, he slept, quietly, peacefully, and Astrid had come to visit. His bed had been moved near the fire in the very beginning to keep him warm and make it easier for people to attend to him or visit, and so Toothless didn't have to traipse up and down the narrow stairs to be with him and go outside to eat.

Astrid had already been fond of the dragon, but she was even fonder of him now. Barring the times he went to go eat and take care of himself, he was usually found next to Hiccup's bed, looking at him dolefully, as if trying to will him awake through sheer force of love and loyalty.

It made her feel less stupid about being as doting herself. No one could out-dote Toothless. Astrid was giving it her best shot, though.

She didn't cry. Tough, awesome shield-maidens didn't cry. Vikings didn't cry. She might have if he'd been lost to them all. Not because she loved him, because she didn't yet and she might never feel that way in the future. She was young and she was a hard girl to impress and one flight over the island wouldn't cut it for her in the love department. It would have been because of the lost opportunity because there would've been so much more she wanted to get to know and never would have had the chance to. It would have been because they'd been friends once and now she wanted to be friends again.

He was still there, though. There was still time for that.

"The healer says you'll probably make it. She says there's still a few problems you have to worry about, but that the worst is over now that your fever broke."

Astrid took him by the hand, pressing her callused fingers against his own callused fingers.

"I've been thinking about what I want to say to you when you wake up. On the one hand, I misjudged you. It wasn't even the flight that convinced me of that, it wasn't just that you made friends with a dragon-it was how you wanted to protect Toothless. That's what changed my mind the most."

She tucked her bangs behind her ear with her free hand.

"I do remember when we played, you know. I remember 'Madguts the Murderous' and how loyal he was to 'Queen Ironfists.' It was just pretend, but it wasn't pretend, was it, Hiccup? If it was you wouldn't have done what you did for the village-not after how everyone treated you all these years. You always tried to pretend to be how you wanted to be: loyal and brave. Only you didn't see that was already how you were, did you. I know I didn't see it."

She gently squeezed his hand.

"On the other hand, all the things I've ever said to you, I said because you tried so hard, and I had to see you spearing yourself in the foot. Constantly. We all did."

She leaned in closer to him.

"I'm not going to say I'm sorry. I'm not sorry for telling you what I thought you needed to hear. I'm never going to be sorry for telling you what I think you need to hear. If I hadn't done it again, most of our tribe would be dead and you'd probably still be sitting there, looking out at the sea and blaming yourself for it."

Reaching out her other hand, she gently pushed his hair off his face,

in a way that was completely without self-consciousness, but may have been filled to the brim with it if anyone else had been there.

"But I am going to answer a question you asked a long time ago. If you were gone, I'd miss you. Most of all, I'd miss getting you _know _you. I'd miss getting to know all the parts of you I overlooked. So you'd better not be going anywhere, Hiccup Haddock."

Standing up, she let go of his hand, leaned over the bed, and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Wake up soon, okay?"

* * *

><p>After Hiccup woke up, he'd been very resilient in the face of his new-found disability. It helped that the entire village saw the missing leg as a sign of bravery, like they generally did with missing limbs and other scars. When someone on Berk lost something fighting dragons, it was a badge of honor-it showed they'd run right into the fray, and Hiccup had run out into the thickest fray even possible, the fray-ey-est fray there ever was. He'd started to get used to it; the leg worked fairly well, especially after he'd tweaked the design a little.<p>

His father was the one that saw him have the only genuine freak-out he ever had about it.

It had just been a bad day. Sometimes his leg hurt like it was still there, but it felt all wrong. Shorter, cramped up, like it was in a weird position. When he woke up that particular day, he was exhausted, from waking up with such pains all night. He also wasn't really paying attention to the fact that just because it _felt _like his leg was there and hurting, it didn't mean it actually was. That was why he tried to climb out of bed without his prosthetic on. Stoick heard the loud thump from downstairs.

"Son, y'alright?" he called up, his voice carrying through the house.

"I'm fine!" Hiccup's reedy voice called back, sounding annoyed.

He'd had to crawl a bit to reach out and snag his leg, and it'd been particularly painful when he put it on. The pain was fading, but some days it was still pretty bad. But hey, he thought, maybe the day would get better. Then he realized it was washing day and dragged his hands over his face. Washing day had become an _ordeal_. Hiccup had heard of places on the Mainland where they had whole heated bath-houses and heated pools and nearly everyone washed up once a week, but in Berk, there wasn't so much emphasis on personal cleanliness, and each home tended to deal with washing-up their own way. Some people used basins, some took a very, very brisk wash in one of the nearby stream, some, well, didn't wash at all. Some were, in fact, _proud _of not washing at all. Vikings, don'cha'know. Reeking like a fifty-day-old vat of dead fish was good for the humors or something.

Hiccup and his father had a wooden tub, which was something of a novelty for Vikings. Well, at least it was a tub for Hiccup, because he actually fit in it. To Stoick it was just a wooden basin.

Hiccup _hated _that tub now. He loathed it with every fiber of his being. Mainly because it was very, very difficult to get in and out of when you had only one leg. The prospect of dragging kettles of warm water back and forth to a tub he couldn't even get out of was a daunting one, and his dad was already using the fire, so Hiccup decided to just take a cold bath and make it very very quick.

"Aren't you going to heat the water?" Stoick asked as Hiccup dragged buckets inside from the pump to the washroom where they kept all the odds and ends to do the laundry.

"Nope."

"Goin' t'be cold."

"I know."

It turned out, it was cold. Very cold. And then he couldn't get out.

"Aw, come _on_," he said, teeth chattering, trying to drag himself over the edge and balance there, nearly tipping it over.

He wound up falling on his face. Again. With another thump.

"Y'alright, son?"

"Fine! I'm just...I'm fine!"

Frustration had been building through a whole night of hardly any sleep, and now it was almost at its boiling point. He finally managed to get dried off and dressed, get his leg back on. Then he realized he forgot a sock and trundled up the stairs to get one, came back down...and the prosthetic slipped on a stair, sending him tumbling down the last few. Stoick came running when he heard the fall.

"Hiccup!"

He was only a little banged up, but it had just been a bad day and his frustration boiled over.

"Stupid, stupid leg! I hate this stupid leg!" Unstrapping it and pulling it off, he threw it and it landed with a clatter nearby.

It was the only time he'd even said a word about it. Stoick hadn't asked and Hiccup hadn't volunteered any of his feelings about it. In the past, Stoick would have left well enough alone, but now he helped his son sit up, his strong hands remarkably gentle.

"Anything broken?"

"No," Hiccup said sullenly, rubbing his elbow where it had hit.

"Opened up that scrape on your face again, though. C'mere."

"Dad, I'm fine-Dad!"

Lifting him right up off the floor, his father carried him over to the stools by the fire and sat him down. Grabbing a spare cloth, he knelt in front of him and dabbed at where it was bleeding.

"You're not fine."

"It's just a scrape. Tough Viking, saved the whole village, remember?"

"That's not what I mean."

Hiccup went silent, and his father stopped dabbing. Putting the cloth down he put a hand on his son's shoulder.

"You haven't said a word about it," Stoick went on, "and that's alright. Gobber adjusted pretty quickly when it happened to him, both times, didn't need to say much about it."

"I don't need to talk about it, either, then."

"You're not Gobber, though, and what I'm trying to say is it's okay if y'need to. Whether you do or don't-do what y'need to do."

It was said awkwardly, which made sense given that it was the first time his father had ever even said something like that to him. He couldn't even remember any other time that he'd offered to just...talk about something-or to let him talk about something. For that reason, Hiccup had always thought it wasn't okay to need to talk about something. It took him a moment, but he took his father's offer at face value.

"It's not that bad. It isn't. Gobber did a good job on the leg. I fixed it up even more. But now some things are just...harder," Hiccup said sourly. "It's bad enough I can't do things because I'm not strong enough to. Now I can't do some things just because...I can't do some things."

"You're trying to run before you can walk. I heard you thundering up and down those stairs. Y'need more time to get used to it before you try to run around like that. What are ye in such a hurry for anyway?"

"I'm supposed to meet Astrid today."

His father's knowing look brought a slight blush to his cheeks.

"Y'need to learn to take your time. You'll adjust to it. As for the tub, we could maybe put a railing on the wall there. I'm not sure what the thump upstairs was, but we could probably do something about that, too."

"That was just me falling on my face."

"Oh. Well. Stop doing that," Stoick remarked mildly.

Hiccup couldn't stop a wry smile from coming to his lips. "I'll try."

The smile faded slightly as he thought of the day ahead of him, and how that tied into his other worries.

"Do you think the whole leg thing bothers Astrid?"

"I wouldn't have a clue, son. You'd have to ask her," Stoick said, getting up to pick up the leg from where Hiccup threw it, tucking the cloth away. "But if I were to hazard a guess, given how much of her time she's been giving you lately, I'd probably say no."

"It's just...whoever...whoever I end up with, they're going to have to deal with it. With me falling out of the tub and falling on my face sometimes, and I'm already pretty weak, so I can see why it might bother someone, and-"

"-And you're over-thinking things, as usual, son," Stoick said with reassuring warmth in his voice, handing him his false leg. "You're not where you have to worry about that yet, she doesn't seem that bothered, and you're not any less whole because of this, Hiccup. You know that."

Hiccup did know that. The whole village knew that. That was why Gobber wasn't treated any differently. Pursing his lips together thoughtfully, Hiccup set to strapping his false leg back on.

"I'm going out for the day," Hiccup said. "Toothless is going to be mad I didn't take him flying this morning, so I'm probably gonna have to take him for twice the time after hanging out with Astrid."

"I'll see you in the Great Hall at supper then," Stoick said, ruffling his son's hair affectionately.

Hiccup could only grin widely in response. His father had been more openly affectionate with him in last month or so than he'd been in Hiccup's whole life so far.

* * *

><p>"Late! This calls for punishment you know."<p>

"It was wash day! Annnd I woke up late today, which is my fault, yes, but look at it this way, for just one hour's wait, now you get to have me all clean-smelling instead of smelling like week-old socks. Or Tuffnut. Same thing, really."

Astrid grabbed him by the collar and dragged him closer, and slave to old habit that he was, he winced reflexively, but she didn't smack him.

"Are you assuming you'll get close enough for me to even notice?"

"Uh, how about I go with no? That's the safe answer, right?"

The very serious expression on her face gave way to a smirk and she dragged him along by the collar.

"I'm letting you off the hook for now. But that means we're going right now and I get you for an hour longer. Toothless will have to

wait."

"We're going where? Exactly?"

"I packed us a lunch. And a blanket. I figured we'd just find somewhere nice in the woods and have a picnic."

Hiccup couldn't help but grin broadly as he was dragged along.
"Sounds like a plan."

It was a good plan. It was a plan to led to really beautiful clearing, lots of talking, a hearty lunch, Astrid sometimes touching his arm, and them laying on the blanket looking at the clouds pointing out the shapes that looked like dragonsâ€”as real dragons sometimes passed overhead.

At one point, Hiccup wanted something to do with his hands, and found himself picking the daisies growing there, weaving them together.

"What do you think is going to happen now?" Astrid said, sitting up, as a Monstrous Nightmare flew overhead. "To the village, I mean? Everything's...better, but until now we'd been doing the same thing for _three hundred years_. It feels like everything is changing."

"Dunno," said Hiccup, looking down at his chest, where the daisies rested, as he threaded them together. "Since I'm the one who started it, I try not to think about it."

"Why's that?" she asked, eyebrows furrowed.

His answer came slowly, and he didn't look up from the daisychain he was making. "In case it all goes wrong somehow."

"It's not going to go wrong. It's just going to be different," said Astrid, looking upward. "It'll take some getting used to, but this is better. Everything's better than it was. I can't even imagine life without Stormfly now."

"It's just the eternal pessimist in me talking."

"Tell it to shut up."

Hiccup snorted, not looking up from the work in his hands. "It's going to take a while, I think. And possibly a gag, I don't know."

Astrid sat up suddenly. "Hiccup, listen to me. Things are different now. Even if you did make a mistake in the future, we're never going to overlook you like we did before. We're never going to treat you like we did. At least _I'm_ not going to."

His gaze was kept away from her eyes and for a little while, there was silence between them.

"It must have been lonely," Astrid finally said. "Seeing the world the way you do when none of the rest of us understood itâ€”|"

The other Viking closed his eyes tight, once, briefly, but then he

opened them again, nodding his head back and forth slightly as he worked on the daisychain again.

"Doesn't really matter anymore. The past is the past."

"You can forgive the village, just like that?"

"I've known everyone since I was_ born_. You take the good, the bad, and the smelly all together. You take people for what they are. The same people that thought I was going to get everyone killed would've died themselves to keep me from getting eaten by a dragon. We're a village."

Reaching out her hand, Astrid placed it on his, stilling it for a moment. "You do realize what kind of person it makes you when you think that way, right?"

"An idiotic one?"

"A good one. A better one that any of us gave you credit for."

Hiccup finally looked up from the daisychain again and caught her eyes this time, his own gaze filled with feelings he couldn't name. Everything she was saying to him right now, the hand on his own hand, for some reason all of it was so very overwhelming. The capacity to be tough and strong and fiercely protective—and sometimes kind, when she had her guard down—it was all so...Astrid. Hiccup found himself wanting to articulate just how much that was a good thing.

"Sitting here talking to me like this, all the things you _ever_ said to me—you realize what kind of person _you_ are, don't you?"

Astrid tilted her head, confused.

"You're so brave, Astrid. You're always honest—even the things you said that made me feel miserable were the truth and any time you were angry at me, I usually deserved it. It was usually because you were afraid people would get hurt because of something I did—or that I'd do something stupid and get myself into trouble. Either that or you got angry because you felt something I was doing wasn't fair." Like during dragon training when she was convinced he was cheating somehow. "You weren't always kind—we're Vikings, we don't really do kind—but you were never cruel."

He went quiet for a moment and then finally said, "It was what I needed, you know. In the end, something had to change. All that time, I thought the thing that had to change was _me_. It turned out that was only half right, but everything that happened, with Toothless and the dragons, that wouldn't have happened if someone hadn't convinced me I could be _better_ if I tried hard enough."

"I don't understand. How is it a good thing that I made you feel bad enough about who you were that you felt like you needed to be someone different?" she asked, her expression almost comically quizzical as she tried to work out the mental gymnastics that were clearly involved.

He pressed his lips together tightly. "You were right, in the end, that I could be better. I just had to be better in a different way than what everyone thought, by playing to my own strengths instead of everyone else's. The alternative to figuring that out was giving up altogether."

It could have happened. He might have gone the rest of his life thinking he was the village joke. All that trying not to be had led him in the right direction eventually.

"You wouldn't have given up."

"Oh yeah? Why not?"

"I wouldn't have let you."

At that, Hiccup couldn't stop a small smile from coming to his lips, and he lifted the finished crown of flowers, sat up a bit, reached over, and plopped it on Astrid's head, before laying down again. It fell down over her left eye, and she pushed it up, smiling at him where he lay.

"What's this for?"

"Just 'cause."

Then she smiled at him, warm and bright, and he realized how much he'd truly missed watching the sun rise.

****The End****

End
file.